DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 241 199 RC 014 595

AUTHOR Marrs, Lawrence W.
TITLE Generic Problems or Solutions in Rural Special Education.
INSTITUTION Murray State Univ., KY. Dept. of Special Education.
PUB DATE Aug 83
NOTE 23p.
AVAILABLE FROM National Rural Project (NRP), Murray State University, Murray, KY 42071 ($6.00).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Change Strategies; Community Involvement; Community Resources; Cooperation; Elementary Secondary Education; Financial Support; *Leadership Styles; Local Issues; *Models; Network Analysis; *Personality Traits; *Problem Solving; *Rural Education; Services; Special Education; *Special Education Teachers; Teacher Recruitment

ABSTRACT

While most rural special education leaders agree on the universality of certain problems (funding inadequacies, personnel recruitment/retention, transportation, low-incidence handicapped populations, staff development needs, resistance to change) in rural areas, no agreement exists regarding generalizable solutions which will work in all rural areas. Relationships between leadership skills, resources, and community and school system infrastructures must be taken into account when solving such problems. Marrs' Law of Non-Absolutes is contained in two axioms which must be considered: (1) Everything in life is on a continuum, and (2) There is no such thing as a pure model. The leadership skills dimension includes 10 components, each possessed to some degree by most special educators: interpersonal skills, negotiation skills, creativeness, logical abilities, self confidence, assertiveness, proactive planning, organization development, communication, and self-renewing abilities. Consideration of community and school system infrastructures requires understanding of formal and informal organizational structures, communication networks, raison d'etre, service/social/professional organizations, and movers and shakers. The resources dimension includes not only four traditional resources (budgets, personnel, time, space), but also requires attention to external funding, collaboration, community involvement, flexibility, recruitment/retention strategies, and technology. Successful rural special educators integrate these factors to serve the best interest of the handicapped. (MH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED241199

Generic Problems Or Solutions In Rural Special Education

FEB 1984
RECEIVED
ERIC/CRESS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Lawrence W Marrs
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Lawrence W. Marrs
Professor and Chairman
Department of Special Education
Murray State University
Murray, Kentucky 42071

August, 1983

RC014595

GENERIC PROBLEMS OR SOLUTIONS IN RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

Lawrence W. Marrs
Professor and Chairman
Department of Special Education
Murray State University
Murray, Kentucky 42071

August, 1983

Abstract

While most rural special education leaders will agree on the universality of certain problems in rural areas, there is no agreement regarding generalizable solutions which will work in all rural areas. Leadership skills, school and community infrastructure, and resources are discussed as dimensions for consideration in the development of solutions.

GENERIC PROBLEMS OR SOLUTIONS IN RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

The question frequently arises, "What is generic about rural special education?" Essentially, only problems are generalizable. Most rural areas can identify funding inadequacies, personnel recruitment and retention, transportation, serving low-incidence handicapped populations, needs for staff development, and resistance to change as major problems (Helge, 1983).

Aha! If we train special education administrators to deal with those problems, the next issue of Exceptional Children devoted to rural special education can state unequivocally that America's rural handicapped children are now safely in the hands of leadership personnel who understand the problems of service delivery in small towns and communities.

Is it the case that once we have identified the problems, the solutions flow automatically? The National Rural Project at Murray State University receives numerous queries each year requesting (as one university professor who was writing a book on special education administration recently asked), "What are generalizable solutions to problems identified in rural special education programs?" The answer, of course, is that there are no generalizable solutions.

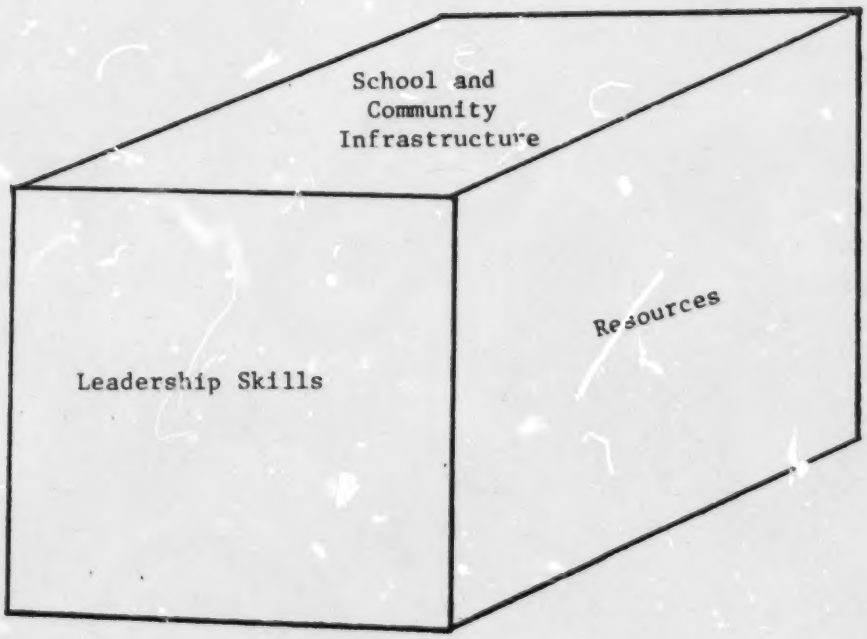
The diversity of ruralness requires leaders with unique human, conceptual, and technical skills. This concept has not been well understood by those preparing special education leadership personnel throughout America. Special education administrators and supervisors are being trained similarly regardless of whether their ultimate employment

objective is a rural setting or a large urban area (with the possible exception of practica and internship placements). Training programs have been lulled by the fact that there are a number of generalizable skills which leadership personnel must have regardless of the setting. For example, PL 94-142 regulations do not differentiate between rural and urban settings (although the ultimate implementation of that law differs markedly). It is much easier to educate leadership trainees about desired placement options using the Reynolds "Continuum of Services Model" (1962) than it is to face the realities about rural school systems (e.g., small numbers of children with a wide diversity of disabilities who must be served by teachers who are not certified in all areas of handicapping conditions present).

Solutions to generalizable problems in rural America are specialized. They are based on constellations of factors such as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

"Dimensions of Solutions"



In any special education leadership position, the relationship of leadership skills, resources, and community and school system infrastructures must be taken into consideration when solving problems such as inadequate funding, transportation, etc. However, in rural areas the interplay of these dimensions is much more personalized and potentially volatile. In rural America, special education administrators rarely have the luxury of "passing the buck." They are the "person in charge" of the entire special education operation. Even though other leadership staff in the school system--assistant superintendents, superintendents, principals--have ultimate line authority over the programs, they usually will defer to the special education leader's judgment on issues related to serving handicapped children. Thus, rather than being protected by a bureaucracy, a special education leader in rural school systems is the "point person" and will garner garlands or garbage depending upon his or her abilities to function within the three dimensions depicted within Figure 1.

Marrs' Law of Non-Absolutes.

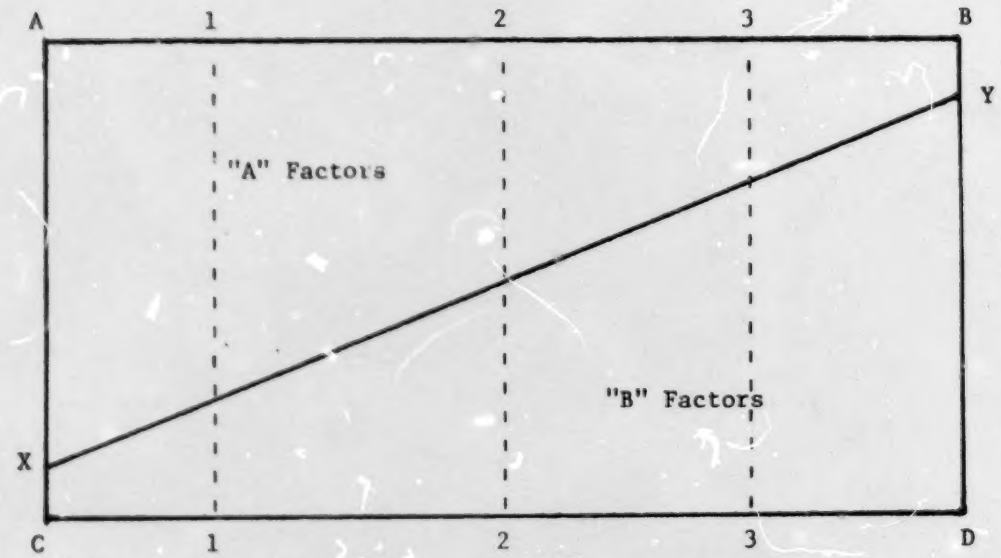
The primary requisite for a leadership person in a rural school system is to understand that there are few "givens" and many variables. Marrs' Law of Non-Absolutes is contained in two axioms:

Axiom #I. Everything In Life Is On A Continuum

Axiom #II. There Is No Such Thing As A Pure Model

These axioms can be easily understood through analysis and discussion of Figure 2.

Figure 2



MARRS' LAW OF NON-ABSOLUTES

(illustrated)

It will be noted that rectangle ABCD has within it a line (X,Y) which bisects the rectangle into "A" Factors and "B" Factors. If "A" Factors and "B" Factors are considered to be variables inherent in any decision, then one can easily see that decisions made at point 1 will have more "A" Factors than "B" Factors. Conversely, decisions at point 3 will have more "B" Factors involved than "A" Factors.

Since, "There is no such thing as a pure model," line X, Y does not contact the rectangle at points C and B. As a result of the Law of Non-Absolutes, we find rural resource room teachers acting as consulting teachers and self-contained special education teachers serving as resource room teachers. Additionally, decisions whether to buy buses or snowmobiles for transporting rural staff or students must be balanced against the possible use of computers and satellite tv.

Once rural special education administrators and supervisors recognize the validity of the Law of Non-Absolutes, they can begin to use or develop many human, conceptual, and technical skills which will enable them to be successful survivors in their school systems. ("Successful" here means that they not only will keep their jobs but that handicapped children will receive appropriate services as a result of their creative leadership.)

The next three sections of this paper analyze the dimensions of the model depicted in Figure 1. The components of each of these dimensions should be considered as "A" Factors or "B" Factors (from Figure 2). That is, they are always variable rather than givens and are, therefore, available to the special education leader as tools or vehicles to get things done.

I. Leadership Skills

This dimension describes the skills needed by the individual special education leader. As depicted in Figure 2, each person will have more or less of the various components of each of these leadership skills. (However, no one will have all or none of any specific skill.)

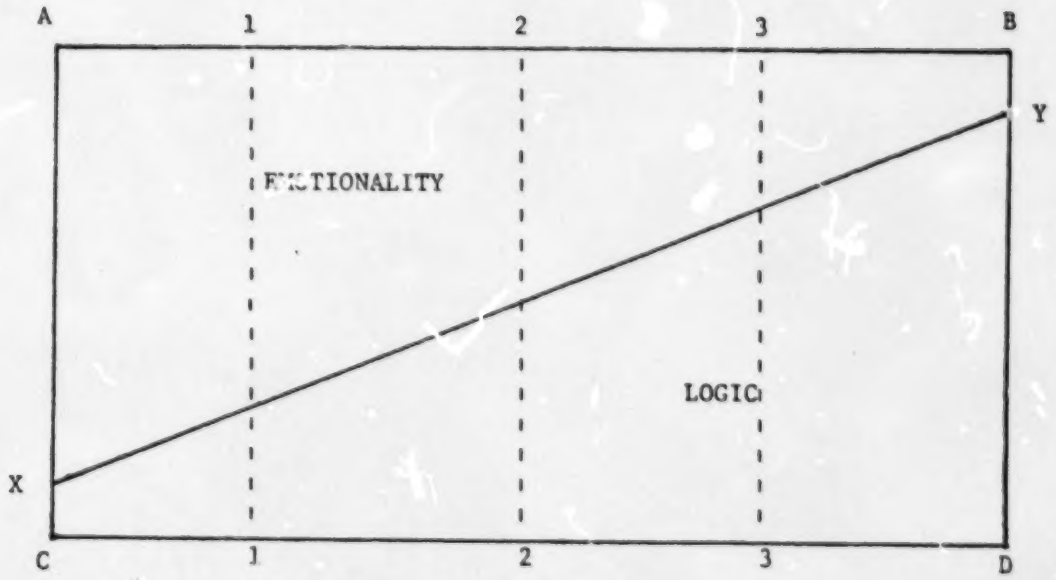
1. Interpersonal Skills - The core of this leadership skill area is simply whether or not the special education leader can get along with others. Whether the individual's leadership style is autocratic, democratic, or laissez faire is not as important as is the honesty and integrity with which the administrator or supervisor interacts with subordinates, peers and superordinates. The ability to really listen, to consider others as human resources, and to be accepting and supporting of a wide ranging array of rural cultures, mores, and customs are important aspects of interpersonal skills.

2. Negotiation Skills - Life is a constant negotiation. Since everything in life is on a continuum most people, including all school leadership personnel, constantly vie for a position on the continuum. While some can acquire certain resources for their programs by virtue of brute force (e.g., having the superintendent as a relative, marrying the budget director, etc.), most special education leadership personnel will find that they can attain reasonable resources for their programs via negotiations. By this we do not mean formal and adverserial negotiations as have become popular with unions and management. Rather we mean on-going interrelationships among administrators wherein the overall intention is to bring about the most good for as many children as possible. In this type of negotiation in which everyone "wins."

3. Creativeness - Outstanding rural special education leaders are usually creative individuals. They have adopted Axioms #I and #II and have learned to adapt, modify and otherwise use resources in untested (and occasionally unseemly) ways. A comment by one of the local "good ole boys" that, "That's never been done before," usually serves as an indicator that (a) it's never yet been proven wrong; (b) it is, therefore, an interesting alternative; (c) the special education leader had better have keen negotiation skills; and (d) the idea will probably work. Creative leaders will make mistakes. Creativity might be manifest in the way the leader gets people involved, uses resources, acquires funding, allocates space, develops programs, etc. Successful creative leaders will continue to make attempts.

4. Logical Abilities - Figure 3 replaces "A" Factors and "B" Factors with emotionality and logic.

Figure 3



While an administrator will occasionally win a point or be successful in an argument because of an emotional appeal, the skill of rational thinking and the use of logical argument will ultimately (or usually) prevail. Note that even on this continuum the successful administrator will still involve some degree of emotional appeal, whether it is contained in an emotionally laden statement or in the tone of voice used to illustrate different points. The special education leader who can negotiate creatively and logically is a definite asset to any rural special education program.

5. Self-Confidence - While self-confidence might be thought of more as a characteristic than as a skill, it is a condition that can be developed. Numerous motivational programs, clubs, and books focus on the development of self-confidence. Special education leaders in rural areas who exude self-confidence will be accorded more respect and authority than will those who lean more toward meekness and groveling. Here too, however, the Law of Non-Absolutes prevails—self-confidence could be perceived as unwarranted cockiness at one end of the continuum while meekness and groveling could be seen as an acknowledgment of an inappropriate job placement. People who are confident in their abilities, their programs, their ideas and knowledge are better for special education than are leaders who lack this quality.

6. Assertiveness - This characteristic which can be developed as a skill is much like confidence in that it is better to have this ability than not to. Special education leaders who are assertive will garner more glory for their programs than will special education leaders who meekly accept what seem to be givens and who don't act on the Law of Non-Absolutes. Assertiveness is a skill which can be developed and is one which commands attention and respect for an individual. Being assertive without being aggressive includes elements of other leadership skills such as interpersonal, negotiation, and communication skills. Aggressive special education leaders are typically fired while assertive ones are promoted or hired by larger school systems. (The assertive rural special educator relocated into an urban environment may find the territory somewhat hostile. This is because urban bureaucracies do not recognize the Law of Non-Absolutes, and the rural leader trained in "massaging" "A" Factors and "B" Factors will run afoul of the system.)

7. Proactive Planning - Thinking and planning ahead are usually considered to be positive leadership functions. A proactive special education leader will monitor the environment as it affects education in general and special education programs in particular. Proactive leaders learn to anticipate events and design adaptive

mechanisms for their programs. (E.g. they are not surprised when the only teacher of the severely handicapped within a 500 mile radius takes a maternity leave afer 8 1/2 months of pregancy. Instead, the proactive leader will have arranged to cover the class.) Programs with proactive planners at the helm are not faced with numerous "brush fires," and they enjoy the luxury of time to prepare creative alternatives to situational variables. (They do not have a poster on their wall attesting to the depth of alligators in the swamp.)

The opposite pole from proactive is reactive, and administrators functioning at the reactive level never seem to wear the right color of socks. (Additionally, they make hurried decisions, spend budgets without a plan, constantly bemoan what "they" are doing to special education, and usually burn out and return to coaching or supervising transportation after a very limited tenure as a leader of special education in a rural school system.)

8. Organization Development - Special education administrators in rural areas need to have skills in organization development if their programs are to become integral elements of the rural school system. This is true by definition since most rural school systems prior to P.L. 94-142 had minimal special education programs. Even now many rural areas are lacking in such special education components as secondary programing and services for children with low incidence or severe handicaps.

One common characteristic of school administrators is "turf" protection. Since the special education turf is usually quite small in rural areas, it behooves the special education leader to expand his or her sphere of influence to include the entire school system. If this is to occur in a positive way the rural special education leader must be a change agent. The goal must be to bring about system-wide acceptance for participation with proactive special education services. Knowledge of process consultation and other organization development strategies such as conflict management and differentiation & integration are important. The special educator must also know how and when to use internal change strategies and when to bring in external consultants.

9. Communication - Clearly, the preceding nine skill areas of leadership depend on good communication skills for their full actualization. Special education leaders in rural areas need to know how to communicate without alienating, convince without brainwashing, and be creative without seeming Machiavellian. The special education leader should be adept at conducting conferences, capable of consulting with other professionals, and able to discuss and disseminate information through written or spoken communiques.

10. Self Renewing Abilities - This final skill area needed by rural special education leadership personnel is extremely important for successful survival in rural areas. Usually the special education leader has no peers within the immediate school system who have the same level of interest in handicapped children and delivery of special education services. Rural strategies for self renewal are extremely different from those available to urban special education leaders. For example, participation in cultural activities is usually limited in rural areas, while the availability of outdoor sports and hobbies is probably more prevalent than in urban America. Rural leaders need to give serious consideration to their own self renewal and that of other special educators within their districts. The ability to maintain the keen edge necessary for optimal development of rural special education programs diminishes as the leader becomes tired and burned out.

The above are the ten major leadership skills needed by rural special education administrators and supervisors. Usually none of these are taught directly in the preservice curriculum, and certainly none are taught with a focus toward rural special education leadership preparation. It is true that we have discussed more human and conceptual skills than technical skills. However, any certification or degree program can be analyzed to assess the specific competencies required of special education leaders. The leadership skills discussed above are those that are essential for success as a rural special education leader.

II. Community and School System Infrastructures

The second dimension (Figure 1) involved in formulating solutions to problems in rural America considers the community and school system infrastructures. An understanding of the ways communities and schools operate, including their historical and philosophical orientations and the ways they are organized and function, is critical. A working know-

ledge of the following six areas is important because the rural special education leader must be able to weigh them along the continuum of "A" Factors or "B" Factors and arrive at valid and viable decisions which benefit special education:

1. Formal Organizational Structure
2. Informal Organizational Structure
3. Communication Networks
4. Raison de E'tra
5. Service, Social and Professional Organizations
6. Movers and Shakers

These six structural elements are present in nearly all rural communities and rural school systems, and an understanding of each is mandatory. Although the six infrastructure components are listed separately, it should be understood that they must be considered synergistically. An analysis of the formal and informal structure requires consideration of the communication networking system, of the various organizations, and knowledge of who gets things done. There are numerous other sociological factors to which the special education leader could attend. However, an operational understanding of these six will allow leadership personnel to make contextually relevant decisions and to design and implement strategies with a better than even chance for success.

An analysis of these six variables by a practicing administrator or supervisor is not difficult. However, it does necessitate attention to variables not traditionally included in a program planning and implementation process.

The importance of this kind of study for an individual special education leader is illustrated by the fact that "key" communicators in rural areas include school janitors, service station owners, and corner store proprietors. The informal organizational structure and the communication networking system assist the "movers and shakers" in rural areas in maintaining the status quo or in bringing about change as wish. (Typically, movers and shakers are not participants in the formal organization and must be identified through a means other than examining organizational charts. In one rural school studied by the author as part of an unobtrusive data gathering activity for the National Rural Project, the secretary whose desk was beside the refreshment area was clearly the source for information transmission within the school. Even though the formal organizational structure indicated that memoranda, speaker system announcements, and faculty meetings were the primary means of communicating information, faculty members made it clear that the school secretary was their primary source of information, including an analysis of the meaning of memoranda.)

It is clear that an understanding of these variables will assist the special education leader to develop situational specific strategies for accomplishing tasks for handicapped children. Constant attention to the Law of Non-Absolutes will encourage special education administrators and supervisors to search for creative alternatives for using the above six elements in the best interest of handicapped children in youth.

III. Resources

The third dimension of the model in Figure 1 which must be considered in developing solutions to problems of program planning and implementation is the resources dimension.

Traditional resources which most special education leadership personnel have been trained to manipulate include budgets, personnel, time, and space. This paper will not deal with these four resource variables since they are fairly obvious, and it is assumed that special education leaders having the leadership skills discussed above will be able to acquire and use these four resources from traditional sources.

There are, however, six additional resource areas the creative special education leader should consider. These six are: external funding, collaboration, community involvement, flexibility, recruitment and retention strategies, and technology.

1. External Funding - External funding comes from federal, state, or local sources or foundations, clubs and organizations, etc. Most funds beyond those received by school systems for student membership come from state coffers. However, many sources of funding within states are not tapped by school systems because school personnel typically neglect to explore beyond their state departments of education. The department of health, bureau of social services, department of mental health-mental retardation, and other agencies frequently have funds that can be accessed by local education agency special education programs. One long-term strategy for accomplishing this is for rural special education leaders to become involved in the planning process regarding fund distribution by state agencies. Participation as long-term funding plans are developed will insure that queries to that particular funding agency in the future will not result in the comment, "We are sorry but our long-term plan does not accommodate public school participation."

   Similarly, foundations having some involvement with a specific rural area may be accesed by the assertive special education leader. Occasionally, foundations having to do with farming, lumbering, drilling, mining, etc., have holdings (or their parent corporations do) in rural areas. It is likely that these foundations have never been tapped by the local education agency and that they would be responsive to funding proposals.

   The Federal Government is constantly changing its funding structures. However, various departments and branches do have a considerable amount of funds available for dissemination to local education agencies.

The primary problems the rural special education administrator or supervisor have in applying for these funds are locating the source of funding and finding the time to prepare fundable (i.e. excellent) proposals. However, through creative delegation and extensive use of midnight oil, these problems are usually not insurmountable.

2. Collaboration - Another means for acquiring resources for handicapped children and their programs is through collaboration with other schools, human service agencies, retired teacher organizations, teacher unions, and other individuals and groups. (In fact, collaborative grant applications are frequently better received than those from individual agencies.) Such collaboration can include synergistically combining any of the primary four resources (budgets, personnel, time, and space) to improve services to the constituent agencies.

   Additionally, collaboration emphasizing long-term interaction between organizations within a community can reduce redundancies and thereby increase resources available to the handicapped in the area. For example, personnel who have handicapped children, youth and/or adults as their constituents and who are employed by a university department of special education, local education agency, a state bureau for rehabilitation services office, a mental health mental retardation care center, or other agency could interface many of their program activities in ways which would provide a full range of services. This same coalition could become involved in the development of state plans as discussed above under External Funding and could apply for external funds emphasizing the value of combining service efforts in a particular community.

3. Community Involvement - Another category of collaboration or involvement that is extremely useful in rural areas is that with local civic and social clubs, churches, and other similar organizations and groups. Creative rural special education leaders around the country have involved their community in such ways as:

   a. A local horseback riding club was recruited to help in developing and operating a "horseback riding for the handicapped program". Club members volunteered their horses and tack (saddles, bridles, etc., for you urbanites), transported their animals to a local riding arena which was donated for the purpose and then assisted school teachers, mental health mental retardation agency personnel, and university undergraduate students as helpers in the program.

b. A local four-wheel drive club volunteered to transport handicapped children and disabled adults to school and social activities during particularly bad weather.

c. A local Lions Club purchased an audiometer and routinely sponsors hearing and screening vision clinics.

Similar examples of community organization assistance are legion throughout the country. Community involvement is not difficult for the accomplished special education leader to coordinate, particularly if he or she has a thorough understanding of the community infrastructure as discussed above.

4. Flexibility - The ability to be flexible is usually considered more as a skill or a characteristic than as a resource. However, in this discussion which deals with using all available resources to meet situationally specific needs, it is seen as a definite resource. The special education leader who is not dogmatic, who can creatively change positions on issues without losing the integrity of his or her point, and who can take available resources and combine them into useful programs and services for handicapped children and youth, is a positive resource.

Flexibility is often required of special educators to any new rural area. Typically, new personnel are filled with "world saving" notions and plans which just as typically run afoul of local procedures, norms, and mores. The inflexible special educator will find living in that rural community uncomfortable and will move on in search of a location more interested in his or her ideas. This probably accounts for some of the 30% - 50% per year attrition rates identified in rural areas (Helge, 1981).

Flexible rural leaders are sought to participate in a wide array of committees, projects, and other undertakings. The inflexible person is shunned and simply not included when decisions are made.

5. Recruitment and Retention Strategies

One of the most useful resources available to rural special education leaders is a positive and proactive recruitment and retention strategy. With rural special educator attrition hovering in the 30 - 50% range, the selection of good personnel committed to providing services to handicapped children in rural areas cannot be too strongly stressed. Sixty-six percent of the rural special education administrators surveyed by Helge (1983) indicated they were having difficulties recruiting qualified staff, and sixty-four percent had difficulties retaining qualified staff.

Recruitment strategies based on the upper levels of Maslow's Hiearchy of Needs have proven to be more beneficial in the recruitment of quality personnel than have traditional recruitment approaches such as salary, class size, or carpeted floors.

Personnel should be sought who have similiar mores and cultural ideals to a particular community. Wild-eyed radicals are great in communities that are liberal and which encourage cultural diversity and spontaneity. However, in communities which are conservative and restrained, such individuals would likely not last beyond the initial contract year.

Retention strategies should begin at recruitment time. Research has indicated that such strategies as matching new employees with "old timers", developing professional support systems, and arranging for the inclusion of newcomers into community affairs all tend toward enhancing the probability that the newly hired rural special educator will be successful in that community. (Helge & Marrs, 1982)

Recruitment procedures should include marketing strategies highlighting the positive aspects of the community via videotape, brochures, etc. Mimeographed position vacancy notices mailed to universities do not have the same appeal to job seekers as do telephone calls and personalized letters.

6. Technology The final areas of resources to be discussed here is the use of technology. Such technological innovations as computer/video disk interfacing, satellite tv, cable tv, telephone conferencing, and other strategies can be employed in rural areas. While a school system may not have the financial resources to acquire this technology, it is likely that some agency, individual, or organization within the community already has some of these capabilities which could be borrowed for school purposes. Additionally, collaborative planning and grant seeking as discussed above are likely to be fruitful for the special education leader. (Because articles by Helge and Hoffmeister in this special topical issue address the use of technology, it will not be further pursued here.)

Summary

The answer to the question, What is generic about rural special education is, "Very little." To be sure, most problems, when listed by categories such as inadequate funding, or recruitment and retention, are

claimed by a preponderance of rural local education agencies. But to identify the problem as generic and to assume the solution will also be generic is a grevious error. The solutions to the unique problems of rural special education programs are not generic and in fact are extremely diverse. Special education leaders in rural settings across America are individually developing solutions to their problems.

Rural special educators who are successful usually function according to Marrs' Law of Non-Absolutes. They are able to integrate the factors contained within the dimensions of the model illustrated in Figure 1 into their ongoing planning and implementation. They are capable of balancing the "A" Factors against the "B" Factors and they recognize that, "Everything in life is on a continuum," and, "There is no such thing as a pure model." Therefore, they are flexible, creative, dynamic individuals who understand the community and school structures and can use all of these resources for the best interest of handicapped children and youth.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Helge, D.I. Images: Issues and trends in rural special education. Murray, KY: National Rural Research and Personnel Preparation Project, Murray State University, 1983.

Helge, D.I. Problems in implementing comprehensive special education programming in rural areas. Exceptional Children, 1981, 47, 514-520.

Helge, D.I. & Marrs, L.W. Personnel recruitment and retention in rural America. Pointer, Winter 1982, 26(2), pp. 28-33.

Reynolds, M.C. A framework for considering some issues in special education. Exceptional Children, 1962, 28, 367-370.